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SUBJECT: Internet Censorship and YouTube

**¶1. (U) SUMMARY:** The Ministry of Information and Communications Technology (MICT) has blocked the popular website YouTube.com because of video clips mocking the Thai King. In the past two weeks, Thailand has also blocked a pro-Thaksin website and has asked at least one major site to take down a political chat room. While Internet censorship is not new to Thailand, there is concern by some media advocates of an up-tick in the number of sites that have been blocked since the September 19 coup -- an allegation disputed by Thai officials. Conversations with Thai officials reveal a lack of both transparency and coordination in decisions to block websites. A draft cyber crime law under consideration will give the MICT the legal authority it currently lacks to block sites. END SUMMARY

YouTube.com Blocked for Mocking King...

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**¶2. (SBU)** On Wednesday, April 4, MICT added Google-owned YouTube.com to its "blocklist" after a user posted a video clip with crudely drawn markings and pictures of feet superimposed over the image of the King. An MICT officer told PDoff that, when the ministry noticed the video, MICT Minister Sittichai Pookaiyaudom contacted Google.com to ask them to pull the offending video. According to the MICT officer, Google responded that the user was using "guerilla" tactics -- posting, pulling, and reposting his clips repeatedly -- making it impossible to pull the clip. As a result, MICT decided to block the entire YouTube.com site "for a few days."

**¶3. (SBU)** Since MICT blocked the site, the original user pulled the clip after getting over 63,000 hits. However, at least ten additional clips commenting on the video or duplicating its content have appeared, each generating tens of thousands of hits.

...As Are Local Sites Critical of Prem

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**¶4. (SBU)** Thai sites critical of Privy Council President Prem Tinsulanonda have also run afoul of MICT. On Monday, April, MICT asked pantip.com to shut down its popular political chatroom "Rajdamnoen." The Minister cited "several threads" that "undermined national security." He did not clarify what topics had raised his concerns, and said the site could re-open when "the political situation improves." Before it was blocked, the room carried several discussions critical of General Prem's involvement in the coup. Pantip.com has also closed a chatroom devoted to discussing constitutional drafting issues. (Comment: Pantip.com and the participants in the Rajdamnoen Room are perceived as leaning towards the deposed Thaksin regime. End comment.)

**¶5. (SBU)** MICT has also blocked other sites critical of Prem. On Friday, April 4, Council for National Security (CNS) Chairman Sonthi ordered police to look into pressing libel charges against www.saturdaynews.org, which was asking for signatures to support Prem's "impeachment." A MICT official said they had not blocked the site, but it is not currently accessible. (Note: Post is unable to

determine the source of the block. End note.) Likewise, sites linked to deposed Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra such as hi-thaksin.net remain inaccessible in Thailand. The anti-coup www.19sep.org has been blocked six times since the coup. On April 4, MICT Minister Sittichai stated that MICT was responsible for "regulating, blocking, or terminating any electronic information media deemed harmful to democratic reform."

Over 10,000 Sites Blocked -- Mostly Porn

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**¶6.** (U) According to C.J. Heinke -- a Canadian-American assistant lecturer at Thammasat University and founder of the local NGO Freedom Against Censorship Thailand (FACT) -- the number of blocked websites in Thailand has risen dramatically since the September 19 coup. Heinke asserted that as of January 11, 2007, MICT's was blocking 13,435 websites, compared to 2,475 on October 13, 2006. By March 15, 2007, the number of blocked sites had fallen to 10,388; Heinke surmised that the drop resulted from MICT culling duplicated web URLs from their "blocklist."

**¶7.** (SBU) This blocklist has never been revealed to the public and is considered sensitive by the government, although FACT has a link to it on its website. Heinke acknowledged that the vast majority of these blocked websites are pornographic or gambling sites. However, it also includes a few anti-coup political sites, displays of lese majeste, and sites supporting the southern separatists, such as the Pattani United Liberation Organization (PULO) site.

MICT'S Defense

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**¶8.** (SBU) In a conversation with PDoff, the American-educated MICT Deputy Permanent Secretary Maneerat Plipat noted that Internet

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censorship in Thailand had been ongoing since the early 1990s, and disagreed with the notion that censorship in Thailand had increased since the coup. She argued that censorship was worse during the Thaksin era when there was constant pressure on Internet providers to shut sites critical of Thaksin. Responding to FACT's allegations, Maneerat disputed the claim that there had been a dramatic jump in blocked websites since the coup; she opined that most of the websites in question had been blocked under the Thaksin era. She noted that the blocklist changes often, with new sites added and others removed upon further review by the MICT's sole cyber cop. Maneerat said that the blocklist is not made public out of concern that it would cause excessive harm to individual sites that are temporarily blocked and then removed from the list.

MICT as Cyber-Censor

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**¶9.** (SBU) In principle, MICT's "cyber cop" (who declined to speak with PDoff) receives tip-offs from the public and other government officials about illegal or offensive web content. The MICT cyber cop then either makes a determination of his own or refers the issue to Manereet for review. If the site is determined to contain illegal content, the cyber cop makes a written request to Thailand's Internet Service Providers (ISPs) to block the site. Thailand does not have standard criteria to decide whether a website should be blocked.

**¶10.** (SBU) Maneerat acknowledged that MICT has no legal authority to block websites, and in order to block a site MICT sends a "request" to the Thai ISPs. Although the ISPs are not required by law to comply, MICT Minister Sittichai has threatened to reduce the bandwidth of any ISP that fails to cooperate. The owners of the blocked site can petition to have it unblocked by demonstrating that it no longer has content that violates the Thai criminal code. In addition, Maneerat acknowledged that MICT has blocked websites itself at the level of the international information gateway into Thailand.

Others Can Block?

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¶11. (SBU) In practice, other Thai government agencies may be able to block sites. During an Embassy-sponsored March 15 program on Internet censorship, Maneerat said that she did not know who ordered the hi-thaksin.net website blocked, but that it "wasn't MICT." Maneerat also said the police had pressured MICT to block websites containing content related to the banned book "The King Never Smiles." Maneerat added that she had not recommended that the websites be blocked. Still, even without MICT's involvement, Thai users cannot access the Yale University Press website containing reviews of the book. (Note: Again, post does not know who blocked the site. End note.)

COMMENT: A New Law?

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¶12. (SBU) The Thai government's Internet censorship regime is neither coordinated nor transparent. Stovepiping within different agencies, lack of transparency in the censorship process, and rivalries between the police and DSI only reinforces these problems.

The Thai National Legislative Assembly is expected to vote next month on a pending cyber crime bill, which, among other things, will vest sole legal authority in the MICT to force ISPs to block websites. Later this month, Public Affairs Section will host two meetings for members of the Special Committee charged with reviewing the draft bill. They wish to study the U.S. experience in cyber crime law enforcement. END COMMENT.

BOYCE